



Standing By Me

An emotional and practical framework supporting young people impacted by serious youth violence

A learning report by
New Horizon Youth Centre





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Foreword	5
Summary	6
Recommendations	6
Introduction	7
Youth Outreach Project model	8
Housing and homelessness	11
Trauma and Mental Health	19
Conclusion	20
Bibliography	21

Thank you to the young people we support and from we learn every day, the Youth Outreach Project team, their colleagues at New Horizon Youth Centre, and the many services, partners and supporters working hard to get the best outcomes for young people.

A very special thank you to Dr Erin Sanders-McDonagh at the University of Kent for her insightful and invaluable external evaluation of the project, and the young people, partners and stakeholders who participated in the research.

We would also like to thank The National Lottery Community Fund, Camden Council and the Mayor's Young Londoners Fund for their support of the New Horizon Youth Outreach Project.

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New Horizon Youth Centre
November 2019



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For more than fifty years New Horizon Youth Centre has been working alongside young people who are homeless and at risk – supporting them through the challenges they face, celebrating with them as they move on into homes, jobs and adulthood.

Young people come to us in our day centre in Camden – and through our Youth Outreach Project (YOP) we go out to them where they need our support on the streets or in prisons. This report, and the evaluation of YOP we publish alongside it, describes the YOP work with young people caught up in gangs and violence. It goes behind the headlines to set out what young people tell us about their lives and some of what we have learnt from them about how we can help them make positive changes in their lives.

Some of what the young people we work with tell us will not come as a surprise. Consistent stories, told without self-pity, of childhood neglect, of trauma and of being let down by the adults and agencies who should have helped them.

But two things in particular stand out. First, so many of the young people who we work with are homeless. Without a safe place to stay they are forced back into areas where they are most at risk and to rely on the old friends with whom they will not be safe. They are literally trapped.

Second, the extent of trauma and poor mental health amongst these young people and the lack of resources to respond to it either in custody or in the community is a disgrace.

These gaps need action by local and national government. There is a heavy price to pay for not doing so, not only

the economic costs of crime and its consequences but the human costs of harm to victims, which often include the young people themselves.

Despite these difficulties the work of YOP shows what can be done. The evaluation of the project highlights the importance of the skills and experience of the team, the holistic nature of the service, which can respond to the wide but overlapping range of needs an individual young person might have and, perhaps most importantly of all, the consistency of the support we offer young people. We build trust because we stick with them through thick and thin, recognising that a young person's journey to a new life will not be straightforward or without some setbacks. We don't give up.

The work of YOP has been made possible by the support of the National Lottery Community Fund, the London Borough of Camden and the Mayor of London's Young Londoners Fund and we work closely with a wide range of other statutory and voluntary agencies. But of course it is the inspiring YOP team who bring all this together. I am proud to be associated with them.

**Professor Nick Hardwick Chair,
New Horizon Youth Centre**

Young people involved in offending or serious youth violence often risk being excluded from housing, mental health, practical and community support. They require service models which address both their practical and emotional needs. External evaluation of New Horizon's Youth Outreach Project (Sanders-McDonagh 2019) shows that effective support of these young people is made possible by long-term relationships of trust with a dedicated member of staff working in a trauma-informed approach. Such support has to be able to follow the person wherever they are in both community and prison settings.

Addressing serious youth violence at operational and strategic level, however, requires changes to legal guidance and some persistent provision gaps in housing and homelessness, such as priority need and reciprocal arrangements. These vulnerable young people are disproportionately affected by mental

health problems, adverse childhood experience and trauma, but the availability of mental health support is insufficient or often not appropriate for this cohort.

Services and accommodation for young people who are at risk or are exiting gangs or offending need significantly more investment. Local authorities, the criminal justice system, youth provision, health services and other statutory and non-statutory agencies operate under significant budget restrictions (Berry 2018; Local Authority Association 2019; Sanders-McDonagh 2019). Our best practice learning puts forward innovations or solutions which do not require huge additional resources for housing, mental health and better outcomes – just more partnership and potentially more effective use of the resources already available.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should update its Homelessness Code of Guidance around priority need and vulnerability to better reflect the circumstances and needs of young people impacted by serious youth violence and their families. Being on the risk of becoming a victim of violence on the streets should be explicitly recognised as a vulnerability.
2. Local authorities should demonstrate commitment to putting in place and expanding reciprocal arrangements. Reciprocals could be extended to voluntary participation of third sector accommodation and hostel providers, include ring-fenced bed spaces, and be incentivised by commissioning requirements.
3. Central and local government should create more youth-appropriate safe accommodation for young people who are at high or immediate risk, are criminally exploited, or need a place when leaving custody. At pan-London level a systematic audit is needed of all bed spaces available for this group in local authority, commissioned and third sector accommodation to maximise existing provision or identify gaps for cross-borough investment.
4. Access to appropriate mental health provision for young people in secure estate and the community should be improved by investment in, and roll out of, models that are able to follow the young person, irrespective of transfers and relocation. This could be encouraged by joint health and justice commissioning of appropriate services which are familiar with this type of flexibility.
5. Through training and formal guidance, public services should increase trauma awareness and consider adopting trauma-informed approaches when working with children and young people involved in offending and serious youth violence.
6. A better understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and its impact on behaviour should be embedded in services relevant to young people affected by youth violence, with clear guidance for local housing authorities about the validity of the diagnosis in decision-making about priority need.

Despite the hard work of numerous agencies and the energies of committed families, loved ones and services, young people continue to lose their lives to violent crime on our streets, in London and elsewhere. At New Horizon Youth Centre in London, the Youth Outreach Project (YOP) works with young people who are victims and perpetrators of such violence – and often they are both.

Since 2012 YOP has supported over 2,000 young people impacted by serious youth violence, developing a unique model and approach to help those who struggle to access what they need. YOP functions often as a 'last chance saloon' for children and young people who have been rejected by other services or whose needs are considered too complex. The project supports young people by addressing the systemic factors of offending and gang affiliation, and helps them to be and feel safer.

With the *Standing By Me* report New Horizon aims to share the learning of this complex yet extremely rewarding project with other statutory and voluntary services supporting young people. It is firmly based on a long-term external evaluation of the YOP work in 2016-18 by Dr Erin Sanders-McDonagh (2019), which we publish alongside our own for the rich evidence and unprecedented insight into the issues faced by these young people it offers. In addition to ethnographic research at the centre, prisons and community settings, Sanders-McDonagh interviewed over a hundred children and young people who were engaged in the project and spoke with thirty-five YOP partners and stakeholders. *Standing By Me* is also informed by a literature review, analysis of case studies, and three years of YOP delivery data for the period 2016-18.

Serious youth violence can only be addressed through genuine cross-sector partnership. YOP cannot support young people without the invaluable work by committed practitioners, multi-agency partnerships, local authority services, prisons, health services and other statutory and non-statutory agencies. While the report highlights provision and service gaps, it is precisely partnership working which remains at the heart of what we do and to which we turn when suggesting solutions in this report.

About New Horizon Youth Centre

For as long as young people are homeless and vulnerable in London, New Horizon Youth Centre will be on a mission to give their potential a home. 'Youth Centre' might be in our name, but we are so much more. We are a vital support network for 16-24 year olds with nowhere else to go. Through the 'one stop shop' services we provide at our day centre and through outreach we support thousands of young people experiencing homelessness in London to improve their wellbeing, change their economic circumstances and find somewhere that they can call home.

New Horizon values collaborating on solutions with a wide range of partners so that we can achieve more together. We lead the London Youth Gateway, a pan-London youth homelessness partnership with Depaul UK, Shelter and Stonewall Housing, amongst others, supporting over 7,000 young people per year. In 2019 we chair the young people rough sleeping sub-group of the Mayor of London's No Nights Sleeping Rough Taskforce and we are a member of the London Housing Panel.

A Note about Language

It is important to remember that each of the young people we support, many still children, is a person first and foremost. This will be reflected in the language that we choose to use throughout the report: we avoid terms such as 'young offender' in favour of 'child or young person who has offended' or 'is involved in offending'.

Although widely assumed otherwise, most children and young people supported by projects like YOP will not identify as being in a gang. Many simply do not believe this to be the case, while others worry about the implications of saying this about themselves. We therefore describe these young people and children as being 'impacted by' or 'affiliated with' gangs or serious youth violence.

The Youth Outreach Project Model

The New Horizon Youth Centre Youth Outreach Project (YOP) supports children and young people, aged 15-25, across London who are at risk, involved in and impacted by offending, gangs and serious youth violence. In the last seven years the project has worked with over 2,000 children and young people, addressing their needs by offering an intensive holistic programme delivered in both custody and the community.

Using six key principles, the YOP model consists of a dual approach, helping these children and young people with practical issues like housing, financial poverty and accessing employment and training as well as with emotional and mental health support, consistency and care.

1 We are relational.

The relationship between the young person and staff is paramount and always valued. We focus on consistency, long-term support and being our word. The relational consistency is fundamental to building trust with young people impacted by serious youth violence as it does not replicate some of the negative experiences of abandonment or staff turnover they may have had in the past.

2 We are trauma-informed.

We remember and hold in mind the past and current traumatic experiences of the young people we support. We reflect on this when interpreting a young person's behaviour and decisions and in our interactions with them. Instead of defining these young people as 'chaotic' and 'hard to understand', our starting point is that their decisions make complete sense to them in the context of their lives, so we work with that.

3 We see the best in the young people we support.

We see them as children and young people first and foremost. In order to assist them properly we may ask for their convictions or diagnoses, will consider and plan for risks, but we make sure that this does not define them.

4 We work on the basis of proactive outreach and voluntary engagement.

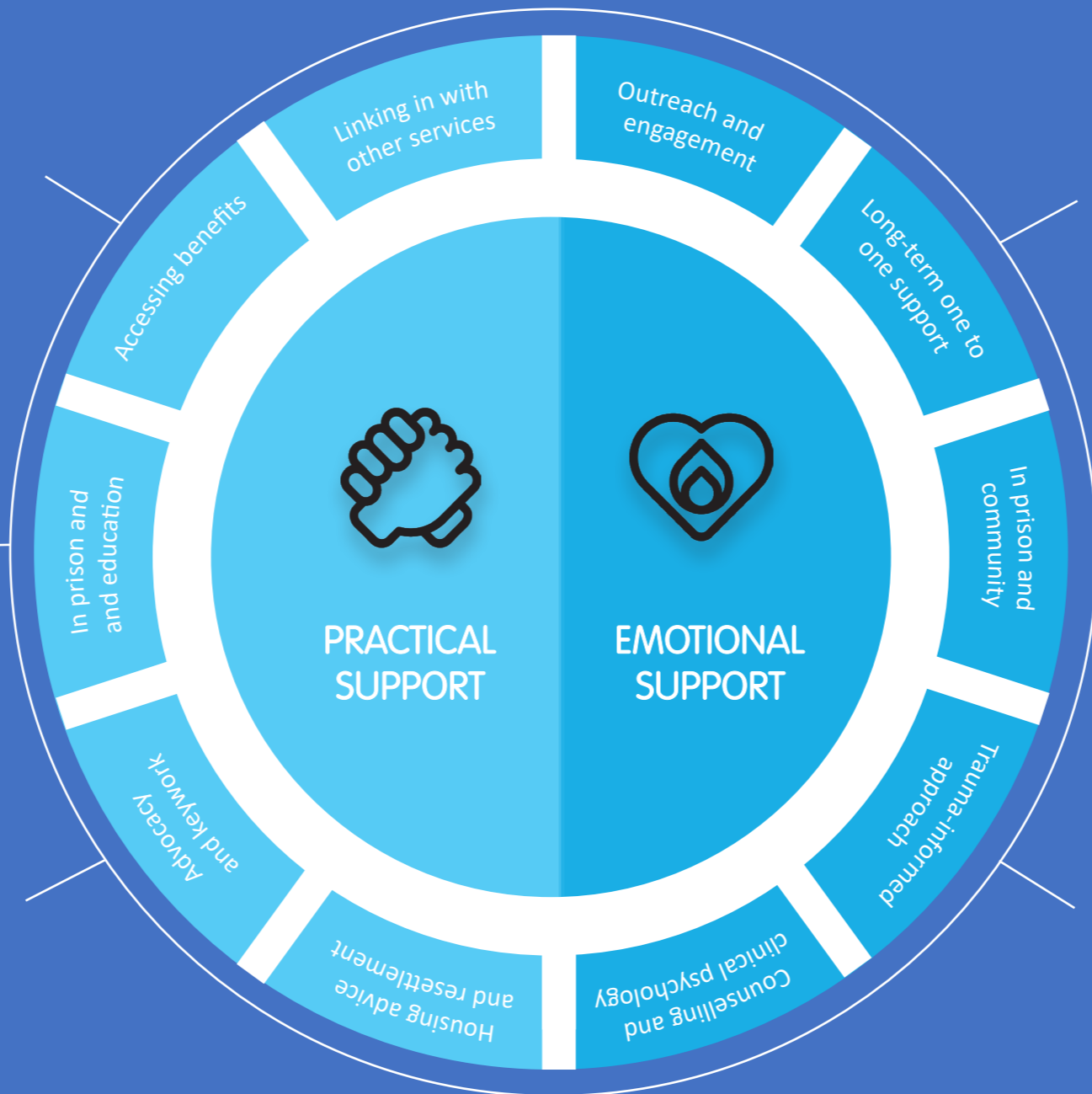
We believe children and young people should be empowered to actively choose the support around them. Engagement with the project is therefore voluntary and a young person does not need to demonstrate a motivation to change as a prerequisite for our support. We understand that young people may reject the support for a long time, but we will stick around.

5 We go wherever the young person is.

We provide continuity of support by working with the young person wherever they are: if they change prison we see them wherever they have been transferred to, if they move to a new area we will help them there. We are flexible in meeting times and places.

6 We work in partnership.

We work and develop relationships with a wide range of other organisations and agencies to enable us to best meet young people's needs, both operationally and strategically. We value how each partner can play a crucial role in achieving young people's safety and success.



Jamil was 19 when he was referred to us by the London prison where he was serving a long sentence for armed robbery. He had been the victim of childhood trauma and witnessed much violence throughout his young life. Jamil was known to the youth offending team previously and had had two short custodial sentences before receiving this lengthy one.

Jamil was allocated a YOP case worker who began to build a relationship of trust with him. During his sentence he was transferred to five different prisons both in and out of London. The YOP team member kept visiting him, making sure the relationship and support continued undisrupted despite the moves.

Jamil worked hard during his time in custody. We helped to fund his training to learn to drive heavy duty vehicles, which he continued post release. When leaving prison YOP supported him with a move away from his home area because, in his words, he had “too much temptation” to return to previous lifestyles.

Jamil repaired his relationship with his aunt, who had been his key family support member but they had fallen out just before his custodial sentence. With our help he found work and has maintained employment since his release, and is absolutely thriving.

YOP IMPACT 2016-18



976 young people supported



253 young people supported into accommodation



292 improved their mental health



188 young people supported into work or education



3,096 key work sessions



1,829 prison visits

The external evaluation of the YOP project leaves no doubt that young people with gang affiliations or involved in offending could engage more effectively in support and services, and were better able to make more positive choices about their lives, if they had managed to move into safe accommodation (Sanders-McDonagh 2019).

Housing and homelessness cannot be ignored if we want to address youth violence and its devastating impact on the lives of young people, families and communities. The government’s Serious Youth Violence Strategy acknowledges homelessness as a risk indicator of becoming a victim or offender (UK Home Office 2018). Many individual, interpersonal and structural causes of youth homelessness, including wider policy issues like the Shared Accommodation Rate and the lack of affordable housing (Homeless Link 2018) are familiar to most, but serious youth violence should be considered to be a driver of homelessness amongst young people too (Harding 2019). Youth homelessness prevention plays an important part in tackling county lines and child criminal exploitation, as we see criminally exploited young people who started working so-called county lines simply to have a roof above their heads. For young people, the criminal justice system in general and homelessness can also become interrelated in complex but perhaps avoidable ways.

Not just an address

For children and young people in the criminal justice system, having an address has a much important additional meaning: it can make the difference between a young person’s freedom or being recalled or kept inside secure and custodial settings, for instance when applying for parole or being released on licence. They can get penalised for their homelessness: becoming homeless could mean a recall to prison. Or the young person chooses not to notify relevant statutory agencies, such as

Probation Services, and tries to manage the situation independently. But without support from projects like YOP, they instead end up sleeping in unsafe, inappropriate places with ‘friends’, in cars or on the streets.

Immediate need

Every week the YOP team meets young people in this situation or they have been released from prison or a young offender institution without an address. In addition most of the referrals we receive from statutory and voluntary sector agencies are for young people at the point of crisis or in an emergency, also affecting their housing. They may have been victims of stabbings or shootings or having their homes or families targeted and attacked, and need a safe place to stay. One of the key obstacles for young people leaving prison, trying to exit dangerous lives or at very high risk is that they tend to have very little documentation when they present at their local housing authority. In many of such circumstances we have to rely on our Emergency Fund initiative; an integral part of the YOP offer, it enables us to provide crisis accommodation.

Yet these young people need better, smoother and quicker transitions and solutions. We find time and again that the housing system does not work for them, despite new initiatives for people leaving prison and rapid re-housing schemes following the government’s Rough Sleeping Strategy (2018) and changes like the Homelessness Reduction Act.

“YOP care about placing that young person in the right environment, and then following through with necessary support afterwards...They don’t just abandon that young person, they give that wraparound service.” (Gangs Worker)

RECOMMENDATION: The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should update its Homelessness Code of Guidance around priority need and vulnerability to better reflect the circumstances and needs of young people impacted by serious youth violence and their families. Being or the risk of becoming a victim of violence on the streets should be explicitly recognised as a vulnerability.

Homelessness Reduction Act

The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017 was intended to avoid precisely these kinds of scenarios and outcomes through the new prevention and relief duties of local authorities. We find, however, that it does not as yet benefit young people in the ways it should. At New Horizon, of the young people newly presenting at our service who had tried to find support from their council first, 80% in 2018/19 and 61% in April-September 2019 were not offered or given an HRA assessment. Of those who did, only 16% and 12% respectively left with a personal housing plan towards solving their situation. For others the local housing authority can decide that the young person does not meet the HRA relief duty, so they leave the council offices with no address and nowhere to go to.

Under the HRA 2017, the Duty to Refer requires certain public bodies to refer people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness within 56 days to local authorities. This type of joint work to prevent homelessness includes probation services, prisons, young offender institutions, secure colleges and training centres and youth offending teams. Both the quality and effectiveness of this shift in working practices are, however, currently still patchy (Heselwood et al 2019). We are noticing that many agencies tend to refer to the local housing authority and YOP team simultaneously, after which we then continue the work.

“I said if I’m really gonna stop all this stuff...I gotta better and stuff so it’s what I done. But I wouldn’t have done that without have a place to stay first.” (Ben)

The problem of priority need

Young people impacted by serious youth violence who need to make a homelessness application under the Housing Act 1996 to live somewhere safe have a lot to prove first. After evidencing their homelessness, eligibility for assistance and local connection, they also need to demonstrate so-called ‘priority need’ on the basis of their vulnerability. Categories of vulnerability include mental illness, physical disability and violence or threats of violence. In our work supporting

hundreds of young people with homelessness applications, the vulnerability measure often becomes a major challenge in different but overlapping ways.

- **Proof of mental or physical health problems**

Priority need is frequently hard to prove at the speed required for the young people we support. We make sure we help the young person build a case, securing medical reports about injuries, mental health assessments, and police statements about incidents. Mental health assessments are, however, hard to access, and the formal diagnosis required takes a long time, particularly in cases of post-traumatic stress disorder which is so prevalent amongst young people involved in serious youth violence (Public Health England 2015; Sanders-McDonagh 2019).

- **Fleeing violence**

Many young people we support are in immediate danger of being injured or getting killed every time they walk on the streets or are in public. Yet very rarely do they have this risk recognised as a vulnerability by local housing authorities even when, in one case, a young man we worked with was shot right outside of his house. Too often young people are denied priority housing need because being a victim outside of the home has not been considered in the interpretation of vulnerability “as a result of ceasing to occupy accommodation because of violence from another person or threats of violence from another person which are likely to be carried out” (MHCLG 2019).

When priority need is refused by the local authority, it might take many months of further advocacy appeals and legal proceedings until the young person receives the homelessness duty. During this time they remain homeless, struggling to move away from offending or gang affiliation, with their lives often at genuine risk.

“If you present to the council someone with a history of extreme violence, who has been a victim of multiple stabbing but no police record, it’s not going to work. They’re going to say, come back when you’ve got something to show us.” (Youth Worker)

YOP Emergency Fund

Knowing that young people’s accommodation needs will not be resolved immediately, the Youth Outreach Project looked for a solution to keep them safe in the meantime. New Horizon secured funding for interim relief accommodation for children and young people on the day. This means that if a young person impacted by serious youth violence discloses a risk or is being released at 4pm, we can place them in safe accommodation immediately without having to advocate with local authorities first.

The Emergency Fund is particularly effective when a young person:

- experiences threats to their safety or wellbeing;
- is particularly vulnerable for health or other reasons, especially when seriously injured in an attack;
- has left prison or hospital without an address.

With the person in safe emergency accommodation, the YOP team have the time to liaise with appropriate statutory services, such as Housing Options, gather any proof or documents, and secure appropriate longer stay accommodation.



We met Mani (22) when he had just turned 18, was fleeing serious violence in an east London borough and the police made clear his life was at risk if he returned to his area. He had also suddenly become homeless.

We had to try to get Mani access to several housing pathways before we could help him settle in private rented shared housing. Initially we helped him to present to a south London local housing authority but he was found not to be in priority need despite fleeing violence. He was then turned down by several self-referral hostels because of a previous sentence for possession to supply Class A drugs. Only sixteen, he had been a victim of criminal exploitation at the time. After months of homelessness, Mani was finally offered a place at a hostel in west London on a temporary basis, while getting ready to move into the New Horizon PRS scheme.

A stable home and our ongoing support made all the difference for Mani's ability to continue his journey on what was a bumpy road. He was arrested again once and would sometimes risk his life by visiting friends in his old borough. But he continued to engage with the YOP worker, and over two years we supported him to achieve essential qualifications and access an apprenticeship. During this period Mani openly considered returning to his previous lifestyle, thinking it easier than working legitimately, and finding change hard. The YOP team responded by offering daily contact, helping him gradually through the challenges.

Mani committed to his resettlement process, enrolled at college and moved into higher education. He is now 22 and is employed full time. He has overcome a lot, including childhood trauma and adversity. Sometimes he speaks about his experiences at public events and with other young people, trying to explain the difficulties in changing his life and having to leave behind his close family members. He reflects that he is now able to trust people other than those he grew up with and has lost some of his suspicion about why people may be nice to him. Although in his own words, things aren't perfect, he feels a lot safer and really has more options than he did four years ago.



Reciprocal arrangements

Young people having to flee violence or threats of violence need smooth working reciprocal arrangements to help them move to a different area and start rebuilding their lives. In London some young people at risk and who live in social housing can benefit from the Pan-London Housing Reciprocal project, run by Safer London and funded by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC). Last year 25% of its referrals were related to serious youth violence (Safer London 2019).

Such reciprocal schemes are, however, not really set up to enable the urgent response and fast relocation which many young people affiliated with gangs need in such circumstances. Matters become even more complex for young people leaving care who need to live in another area for their safety.

Strong reciprocal arrangements between local housing authorities offer the safest and quickest solution. Simply ring-fencing reciprocal bed spaces through commissioning would already open up much needed safe places. However, provision and approaches are currently fragmented, as local authorities participate on a voluntary basis and, for a variety of reasons, few want to join. Nevertheless many would in fact benefit and greater commitment is necessary. Across Greater London some have already indicated to us an interest for a renewed cross-sector exploration of reciprocals. Replicating schemes like the Pan-London Housing Reciprocal project to include third sector accommodation providers could be another opportunity worth considering to increase reciprocal places in existing housing provision.

Lack of bed spaces

Accommodation options for young people experiencing homelessness are scarce and continue to dwindle (Homeless Link 2018; Heselwood et al 2019). The HRA has put further resource and other pressures on local authorities to secure suitable housing options for this demographic. Young people with additional risks or support needs, real or perceived, because of their offending history or gang affiliations face even more closed doors in their search for appropriate accommodation. What affects provision so badly for this group specifically are:

- **Safety and risk**

Young people's safety can be compromised in hostels or supported accommodation without proper risk assessment or because other young people moving in and out of the hostel share the location of a specific young person with those who put them at risk.

- **Support**

Accommodation providers require the resources and expertise to be able to support young people impacted by serious youth violence and who are at high risk or, at the very least, the ongoing involvement of specialist external agencies like YOP.

- **Catch 22**

Many of young people YOP supports are rejected by self-referral hostels or bigger housing providers because of risks or offending histories. This creates a catch 22: the young people are considered too high risk for universal homelessness provision but not complex or high risk enough to be deemed in priority need.

RECOMMENDATION: Central and local government should create more youth-appropriate safe accommodation for young people who are at high or immediate risk, are criminally exploited, or need a place when leaving custody. At pan-London level a systematic audit is needed of all bed spaces available for this group in local authority, commissioned and third sector accommodation to maximise existing provision or identify gaps for cross-borough investment.

RECOMMENDATION: Local authorities should demonstrate commitment to putting in place and expanding reciprocal arrangements. Reciprocals could be extended to voluntary participation of third sector accommodation and hostel providers, include ring-fenced bed spaces, and be incentivised by commissioning requirements.

Tommy (18) could often be very angry and aggressive with family, friends and YOP staff. He had been engaging with the Youth Outreach Project for some years before he felt safe enough to attend a mental health assessment. The assessment found that he had experienced many traumas throughout his life and was suffering from PTSD and depression, exacerbated by cannabis use. Tommy started a programme of support but this was abruptly ended when he was unfortunately remanded and sent to an adult prison. Here he started to suffer psychosis.

YOP staff immediately advocated for Tommy to be referred to mental health services in the prison and were told he had been assessed but had not met their threshold. Tommy later mentioned that this mental assessment had merely been someone from prison health care speaking to him through his cell door.

His mental health continued to deteriorate. During a court appearance, a court mental health team assessed him as they were severely concerned about his wellbeing and recommended a proper mental health report. Tommy was, however, returned to prison without any access to much needed services during his entire time on remand.

When released Tommy was not allowed to re-start his treatment at the community mental health service he had used previously. Had he not been able to access in-house YOP mental health support, he would instead have been placed on a long waiting list for yet another assessment.

YOP Letter Writing Project

Life in prison is often not only unsafe but also extremely isolating for the children and young people in custody. In 2012 the Youth Outreach Project started its pioneering Letter Writing Project. In line with its relational and assertive outreach principles, the project staff began sending handwritten letters to the young people in prison, getting a high response rate. The letters are a simple and direct way to address some of the isolation experienced by these children and young people, with many often feeding back that they make them feel that they had not been forgotten. Letter writing also allows young people to express feelings and ask for help that they may not feel comfortable doing face to face. As such, this element of our work strengthens the relationship building as well as the practical and emotional support we provide.

A devastating 80% of the young research participants in the external evaluation of the YOP project had witnessed or experienced extreme violence (Sanders-McDonagh 2019).

Most children and young people we support through the New Horizon Youth Outreach Project have had a childhood history of traumatic experiences, affecting their development and wellbeing, and influencing their engagement in offending and serious youth violence. In its turn their very affiliation with gangs or involvement in offending increases their chances of undergoing further trauma and violence.

Young people in the criminal justice system in general are disproportionately affected by childhood trauma and adverse childhood experiences such as abandonment, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and bereavement (British Medical Association 2014; Twitcher and Sylvester 2018). As many as 91% of young people involved in offending have experienced abuse or loss (Beyond Youth Custody 2016), and mental health problems are very prevalent in gang affiliated young people. (Public Health England 2015).

“One of the best things about YOP is the contact they maintain with our clients while they are in custody. It keeps the guys hopeful and encourages them whilst serving their sentence.”
(YOI Interventions Manager)

Provision gaps

Young people supported by YOP present with symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, depression, psychosis and other illnesses across the mental and emotional health spectrum (Sanders-McDonagh 2019). Despite recent moves toward better resourcing of children

and young people’s mental health support (RCPCH 2019; Twitcher and Sylvester 2018) and there being some excellent services, they cannot bridge the very significant gap in appropriate mental health provision in the community and in prison or during transitions.

- **Waiting times**

No matter how acute their problems, young people involved in offending or serious youth violence are confronted with long waiting times for mental health assessments and treatment. Undiagnosed and without appropriate support, their mental wellbeing often deteriorates and, more practically, they struggle to secure housing without assessment. Access to mental health support in prison can be even more challenging due to high eligibility thresholds.

“Look, I’m not proud of it, alright, but I have seen things you can’t even begin to imagine.” (Dwayne)

- **Interruptions**

The set-up of mental health provision does not serve the best interests of children and young people in the criminal justice system because services are commissioned for local delivery. Imprisonment, release and prison transfers mean that assessment and treatment are interrupted, withdrawn or even stopped. Our work shows that young people benefit enormously from consistency and support following them where they are (Sanders-McDonagh 2019). This is necessary for effective mental health provision too.

To address some of these problems, we have invested in in-house therapeutic support tailored to the needs, life worlds and experiences of young people affected by serious youth violence and criminal exploitation through our Regulate Project.

RECOMMENDATION: Access to appropriate mental health provision for young people in secure estate and the community should be improved by investment in, and roll out of, models that are able to follow the young person, irrespective of transfers and relocation. This could be encouraged by joint health and justice commissioning of appropriate services which are familiar with this type of flexibility.



The Regulate Project

With young people getting stuck in the system without mental health support and unable to start treatment or to address trauma, the Youth Outreach Project at New Horizon commissioned the Regulate Project.

Through Regulate the expertise and support of a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist have become embedded in the YOP service. The project is beneficial to young people for a variety of reasons, including:

- conducting mental health assessments, providing direct and quick support to young people;
- providing written reports to help meet the evidence gap around priority housing need and vulnerability for young people affected by serious youth violence or criminal exploitation;
- supporting young people to understand PTSD, and their responses and emotions in light of the trauma they have experienced.

Critically, young people can be seen very quickly after identifying an issue.

The development of the Regulate Project has been based on a clinical work programme delivered by a commissioned service for gang affected young people in the community and custody.

Trauma and Mental Health

Trauma-informed provision

Young people mostly do not recognise their symptoms of trauma or PTSD. We support them to understand that these are healthy responses to extremely unhealthy situations, such as feeling paranoid or anxious when fleeing violence or having been stabbed.

Having guided hundreds of young people through complex life changes and traumatising events, we have observed how young people are, however, often re-traumatised as a result of their engagement with care, criminal justice, prison and housing systems when their histories, needs and behaviours are ill-understood. Greater attention needs to be paid to what works for young people with adverse childhood experiences or who are traumatised (Bush 2018).

“When you in that gang and offending life your head’s a bit narrow. Where I’m from it’s weird for people to be genuinely nice. That’s why it’s different at YOP. It’s the best experience I’ve had.” (Eamonn)

For instance many young people YOP works with have been denied priority housing need following traumatic events. Assessors might explicitly blame homelessness on offending behaviour or ‘gang involvement’, ignoring the reality of the young person having been the victim of a violent crime or indeed suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. Clearer understanding of the PTSD diagnosis is necessary at local housing authorities to start making more consistent and fairer priority need decisions.

Trauma-based policing models and trauma-informed youth justice services are no longer uncommon, and

indeed feature in the government’s Serious Youth Violence Strategy (2018). These could reasonably be extended to public services such as local housing authorities through training and formal guidance.

Social isolation and loneliness

Having abruptly left behind friends, family and support networks, a strong sense of isolation is common amongst young people resettling in a new area for safety reasons or as part of a gang exit process. Already bereft of their social networks, they then have to deal with some complex and life-changing challenges.

Moving away from an offending lifestyle means having to adjust to the phone no longer ringing constantly, to not always being busy and, crucially, to having lost a role. No matter how we might perceive that previous role, such as supplying drugs, it had provided the young person with social contact, identity and meaning. These are all essential to human wellbeing, so when these are temporarily lost in the resettlement process, there is not only a risk of reoffending, but mental health problems have a chance to develop or deteriorate.

In addition to our practical resettlement support, we therefore make sure that the YOP team continues to offer long-term emotional care to young people leaving behind gang affiliations. They need support to help them grieve for their previous lives and identities and to prepare going forward.

“People from like my area, my type of upbringing, you can’t leave that area without a lot of support... And YOP has been my support.” (David)

RECOMMENDATION: A better understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and its impact on behaviour should be embedded in services relevant to young people affected by youth violence, with clear guidance for local housing authorities about the validity of the diagnosis in decision-making about priority need.

RECOMMENDATION: Through training and formal guidance, public services should increase trauma awareness and consider adopting trauma-informed approaches when working with children and young people involved in offending and serious youth violence.

We continue to learn most from the young people using the Youth Outreach Project. Their courage to open up to new people, talk about severely traumatic experiences, and engage with a service they might not initially trust is humbling. Their commitment to long and hard processes of change in difficult circumstances is inspiring.

More than a hundred of these young people agreed to share their experiences with Dr Erin Sanders-McDonagh for the YOP evaluation report (2019). We cannot thank them enough. Their words describe the challenges they face, and demonstrate how long-term, trusting relationships help young people to overcome personal, emotional, practical and more structural challenges in their journeys.

In our turn we are pleased to be able to share our learning from working with our YOP model, its dual approach of practical and emotional support and its principles. It is a model which helps us to be standing by the young people wherever they are in their lives.

“YOP have given me a new start, helped me to get housed, get a job and gain a bigger picture of life. I’m pleased I know the YOP people because they have helped me stay clear from bad company and given me hope, even when a situation was hopeless.” (Ricky)

Our work has previously underpinned learning or influenced best practice elsewhere (Factor et al. 2015; Beyond Youth Custody 2018; Camden Youth Safety Taskforce 2018), and we hope that *Standing By Me* and the YOP evaluation report will be useful too, because the need for services like YOP is evident. We receive far more referrals than we have capacity to take on and young people increasingly find us independently through word of mouth.

Across London and indeed nationally the demand for services for young people caught up in offending, violence and criminal exploitation is overwhelming.

Over the last few years, initiatives like the Young Londoners Fund and the Violence Reduction Unit at the Greater London Authority have therefore been hugely encouraging. Nationally, we welcome the government’s Serious Violence Strategy (UK Home Office 2018) and subsequent Serious Youth Violence Summit in April 2019, promoting the public health approach.

Our model at New Horizon Youth Centre complements a true public health response; one in which all aspects of the child’s and young person’s life are considered. However, we also recognise that to deliver a genuinely credible public health model, young people need to have access to the basics: financial resources, safety, opportunities for development, education and training, emotional and physical wellbeing, and housing.

In *Standing By Me* we have focused on challenges to two of these basic needs, namely mental health and housing. Through our recommendations we aim find ways to address these in not only those structural obstacles but to highlight an understanding of limited public and local authority resources at a time of increasing demand. Our recommendations are about tweaks and partnership. For instance, the proposed pan-London bed space audit available to this cohort of young people could mean more provision without actually having to commission or pay for additional ones. We now look forward to work with others across all sectors to achieve the changes these young people need.

Because for New Horizon Youth Centre every child and young person deserves to be treated as an individual who needs someone to stand by them and help give their potential a home.

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im a nice
guy at heart
who would
do all most any
thing to feel
Normal...

I Day I Hope
To Have Nice new
stuff / Home / JOB

Can life Really
Be this unfair as
im Trying So So Hard
to be and Have a
life like all of you

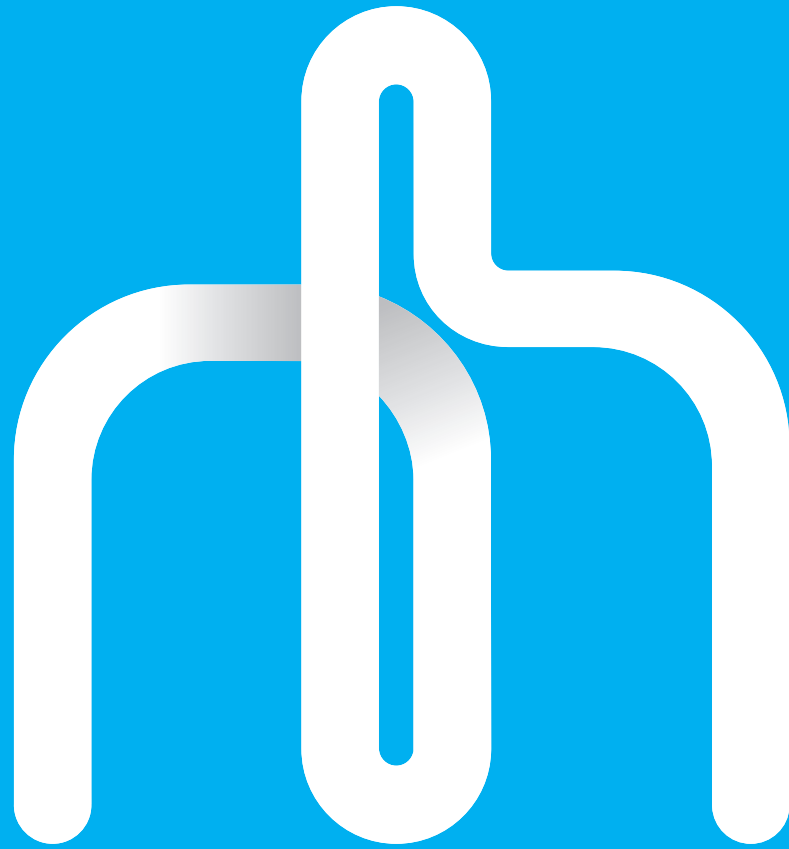
No Fixed Address
above my name
could you cope??

Please Believe Me
its Really Tough
and unfair

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My Voice
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Charity Number 276943

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